

Cultures and boundaries

Briefly mentioned in Glazer and Moynihan's 1975 edited volume was the work of Fredrik Barth, the Norwegian anthropologist, whose writings have been singularly influential in the study of ethnicity. Barth's essay, published in 1969, was written as the introductory piece in a volume of collected essays deriving from a conference at Bergen in 1967 (Barth 1969). Two of the contributors write about peasant or nomadic communities in Norway; the others are concerned with ethnic identities in Sudan, Ethiopia, Mexico, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Laos. The central proposition coming out of Barth's work is that ethnic identities are sustained by the maintenance of what he calls 'boundaries', the lines which mark off one group from another. These lines are not drawn by simple cultural difference – e.g. the 'A's are the people who speak 'A'-language. The boundaries are drawn by social behaviour which is relevant to the recognition of membership, and to the drawing of distinctions; the cultural 'items' which are used to make this distinction vary, and may be only a small part of the cultural repertoire of a particular group. This could be stated as the proposition that: the 'A's are the people who are not 'B's; and speaking 'A'-language is a way of knowing and showing this. Indeed on Barth's argument the decisively important culture difference might be quite small (compared to, say, a major language difference).

Despite the fact that these insights were drawn from – for the most part – work grounded in 'Third World' societies, the relevance of Barth's central proposition has been taken to have general application. The kinds of segmentary societies – societies and collectivities with a distinctive way of life which are largely self-reproducing but lack a formal central authority – that Barth is discussing are often found in post-colonial societies straddling the geography of neighbouring states (such as Pathans in Pakistan and Afghanistan). As these post-colonial states attempt to secure their power and command over diverse populations, these segments are at risk. If they do not constitute part of a majority population or of a politically dominant elite, minorities distinguishable by a feature of language or religion find themselves under suspicion. Fur-

thermore, where new states are weak, both economically and in the command of their territory, rivalries between contiguous groups or groups side by side in the same region may prove beyond the capacity of the state to control and restrain. Such groups, many of them in parts of Africa and Asia, are of the kind traditionally studied by anthropologists, such as Evans-Pritchard (1962) in the colonial era, by Edmund Leach (1982) rather later, and by Barth and his colleagues at the point of decolonization and beyond. For Barth, the Pathans of Pakistan and Afghanistan are an 'ethnic group'; for Glazer and Moynihan, the descendants of Italian immigrants in New York City are. The extent to which these are quite different ways of life in utterly different settings has not stopped people from discussing 'ethnicity' in both as if it were the same sort of phenomenon, wherever it might be found.

Barth begins by outlining how anthropologists typically define ethnic groups, citing four lines of definition:

- 1 A group which is largely self-perpetuating;
- 2 A group which shares fundamental cultural values;
- 3 A group which makes up a field of communication and interaction;
- 4 A group which has a membership which identifies itself and is identified by others as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order.

Barth does not dismiss any of the conventional meanings of the above but he is at pains to make it clear that it is not possible to define an ethnic group as the 'possessor' of a particular culture which functions to make it distinctive. The more he pursues his case the more he inclines to identifying 'social organization' as the definitive feature, and feature '4' above as the decisive one:

We can assume no one-to-one relationship between ethnic units and cultural similarities and differences. The features that are taken into account are not the sum of 'objective' differences but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant – some cultural features are used by actors as signals and emblems of difference, others are ignored. (p. 14)

It is not that culture is unimportant nor that there cannot be found real patterns of cultural difference. Barth speaks of overt signals or signs, including dress, language, house-form and lifestyle as well as moral values and standards. But the critical thing in defining the ethnic group is the 'maintenance of the boundary' between one group and another. The culture of a group may change or, in Barth's own words, 'be transformed' (p. 14), and the cultural item which marks 'A's from 'B's may be changed. Nonetheless the 'A's and 'B's persist. This leads Barth to his most succinct definition of this approach, the one subsequently most repeated: 'The critical focus of investigation from this point of view becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff which it encloses' (p. 15).

Having established a way of thinking about ethnic groups, Barth proceeds to examine how members of ethnic groups may behave both individually and collectively. Within an ethnic group, behaviours are construed differently from behaviour which crosses ethnic boundaries. With other members with whom identity is shared there is, as Barth puts it, an 'acceptance that both are playing the same game'. When this is so it makes it possible for their relationship 'to cover all different sectors and domains of activity'. Their relationship is not, in another sociological way of describing relationships, single-stranded. A relationship, for example a trading relationship in which 'A's exchange things with 'B's, is single-stranded if outside the trading exchange the 'A's have little or nothing to do with the 'B's. Thus, as Barth puts it, 'a dichotomization of others as strangers implies a recognition of limitations on shared understandings and a restriction of interaction to sectors of common understanding and mutual interest' (p. 15).

Barth's emphasis on identification of members and strangers, on the system of classification, on 'boundaries', and on the common understandings which govern relationships has been taken up by subsequent anthropologists (cf. Banks 1996 and particularly Eriksen 1993). These common understandings govern relationships between members, between members and strangers, and the scope of the relationships between members and strangers (for example, do they just trade with each other, or do they engage with each other in

many ways?). But the most striking consequence of Barth's (quite short) essay has been to detach 'culture' from ethnic group.

## Culture

We began this book by showing how all three principal concepts that are of interest to students of ethnicity – race, ethnic group and nation – have strong connotations of two attributes: descent and culture. We suggested that all three, race, nation, ethnic group, may be regarded, in broad terms, as 'descent and culture communities'. They are all forms of social identity, forms of inclusion and exclusion, forms of social classification, and modes of social interaction in which culture and descent are always implicated. We then suggested that if 'culture and descent' is the core of these concepts, in the particular elaborations of the concepts there are some key striking ways in which they depart from each other. Race, for example, has a long historical connection with heritable physical traits, with phenotypical difference, and also with an abstract theory of the divisions of humankind, and also with an abstract theory of the divisions of humankind, albeit one that is much discredited. Nation has particularly strong connotations with claims to self-rule and is closely linked to the 'state' in the pairing as nation-state. It is also possible to detach the idea of nation entirely from the concept of shared ethnicity. If all-comers (at least those legitimately in-migrating) are welcomed as citizens and the multi-ethnic origins of a society are accepted, then the idea – or ideal – of the nation equates to a civic ideal of 'the citizens of the country'. This idea of nation is legally and constitutionally defined, not ethnically defined. Ethnic group by contrast has a history which has gathered up connotations of both foreignness and minority status, a 'group' less than the society as a whole. This connotation too has been weakened by the extension of the idea of ethnicity to majority ethnicity in Glazer and Moynihan and beyond. But at this point we are making a mental note of the partial detachment of 'ethnic group' from culture. This detachment from culture is a departure from a 'traditional' sociological and anthropological idea of ethnic groups as marked by, and